Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/426535805

Downloaded on Mar 25, 2024

a hard habit to break

But the Sixties conjure indelible images for the YouTube generation: long hair, mini-skirts, hippies, student demos. It was a "youthquake" – the decade when parental authority went out the window, and the Generation Gap was coined ("Don't Trust Anyone Over 30").

The Beatles, as a showbiz phenomenon and creative force, were the defining '60s group, the huge catalyst for both musical and social changes. And cheeky marketing, too, the first truly "viral" attack in pop culture (following Sinatra and Presley, only much larger): Before anyone in America heard a note from them, their image – the "long" bowler haircuts, the mod suits – piqued people's curiosity.

Recalling the Fab Four's double-sided assault on America – I Want to Hold Your Hand and I Saw Her Standing There – Tom Petty told Rolling Stone's recent Playlists edition: "This came on the radio, and overnight everything was different. If you weren't there, it's hard to believe. But everything changed instantly." It IS hard to believe, because these jejune songs are hardly the best of Lennon McCartney. But the SOUND was something else, a revolution in itself, a flash-fire of creativity.

The British, said Petty, "had a more romantic view of rock 'n' roll than the States did ... The energy that came with the British Invasion was the difference – these guys brought the guitar to the fore. You weren't getting guitar off the Shirelles." (Two Shirelles hits made the Stone's Top 500, Petty? None.)

That said, there was genius before the Beatles, in Phil Spector's path-breaking production techniques (and his girl-group hits) of "little symphonies for the kids." Beach Boys surf songcraft was always clever, as in Fun Fun Fun, its protagonist driving her daddy's T-Bird so fast "She makes the Indy 500 look like a Roman chariot race."

Most important, it was also the decade when black music – particularly the shimmering beat of the Motown Sound – arrived in the Top 40 to stay, after being relegated for decades to the "race charts." The Beatles, Stones, Animals and Kinks, who grew up devouring hard-to-find rhythm & blues records, virtually saved R&B and soul, according to Muddy Waters, who watched the Stones record their second album 12x5 in Chicago's historic Chess Studios. "They stole my music, but they gave me my name."

An intriguing paradox: British invasion groups made black music covers "safe" for white audiences; in this sense, they were merely more talented versions of quintessential white-bread Pat Boone covering Fats Domino's Ain't That a Shame. On the other hand they inspired millions to seek out the real thing.

We're still attracted to classic soul (Motown, Stax, Chess) because rappers, emblematic of today's black culture, generally don't sing. Whereas there was always a profound sense of spirituality in Aretha's voice, today's wannabe divas, with their over-the-top pipes, tend toward glitzy posturing, American Idols all.

Make no mistake, there was a lot of junk in the '60s, such chart-topping piffle as Green Tambourine by The Lemonpipers, This Diamond Ring by Gary Lewis, Can't You Hear My Heart Beat by Herman's Hermits, novelty numbers and too much safe-as-milk fare to mention.

That said, the '60s were innocent times, when musicians weren't afraid of innovation on a large canvas. The year with the most songs making Rolling Stone's list was 1965. Ah yes, whenever you heard the organ and piano opening of Dylan's Like A Rolling Stone in the summer of '65, you stopped dead in your tracks – and wondered whether radio would play the full six minutes (the lengthiest hit ever) or the badly truncated version.

The following spring came Brian Wilson's glorious ever-green production of the Beach Boys' Pet Sounds (1966), an airy take on Spector's Wall of Sound that made awkward teen coming-of-age lyrics (by Tony Asher) work (opening with Wouldn't It Be Nice: "We could be married, and then we'd be happy"). The others didn't know what to think of their genius boy-wonder; lead singer Mike Love was hostile to the thought of such introspection cutting into sales. "Don't f– with the formula," he famously said. Wilson got a reprieve with the magnificent chart-topping mini pop-symphony Good Vibrations, but after the surrealistic Heroes and Villains the counter-culture largely bypassed the Beach Boys.

Pet Sounds was also a touchstone for the first wave of rock critics, who pushed the music with passion, knowledge, humour, idiosyncrasy, sometimes pretentious or sophomoric but always deeply involved. Among these scribes on the front lines: Richard Meltzer, Nick Tosches, Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, Lillian Roxon, Ellen Willis, Ed Ward, Jon Landau, Sandy Pearlman, Vince Aletti, Bobby Abrams, John Morthland.

Meltzer's The Aesthetics of Rock was not only a takeoff on academic style, complete with meticulous footnotes, but also a densely sentient epistemological work. "The best thing about the '60s was the music," Meltzer told me years later, "and that could be summed up in a couple of dozen albums ... A lot of what happened in the '60s felt very miraculous, like it was coming out of nowhere. You didn't have 'rock-around' yet. There was no full mag, but it was certainly in massive discontinuity between what had been encouraged before, in terms of artistic output. It wasn't even like anyone was making art – it was just an emanation of self, like breathing, sweating."

Then came Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, its elaborate collage cover and advance hype – a "concept album" the Beatles spent months of meticulous multi-tracking to create – lent the album a high-art sheen before anyone removed the shrink wrap. Eggheads and professors who'd proclaimed Beatlemania "won't last six months" went gaga over Sgt. Pepper, the Beatles transformation of British music hall into stoned art songs (most importantly the magnificent A Day In The Life), comparing them to T.S. Eliot, Schubert, and so on.

The '60s were innocent times, when musicians weren't afraid of innovation on a large canvas.

Richard Goldstein, who wrote Pop-Eye, a witty sociologically inclined Village Voice column, had the nerve to pen a devastating review of Sgt. Pepper for the New York Times, receiving more outraged letters than any other Sunday Arts section article ever. "It was the first time I'd heard a boring Beatles album," Goldstein told me then, visiting Expo 67 in Montreal's LSD summer. "And it was very tricky, gimmicky. I listened to it dozens of times, and it was a hard review to write ... but I figured a lot of people would agree with me. It never entered my mind it would cause such a huge stink. Professors wrote in saying the Beatles were Schubert and how dare I put them down! ... It hurt a lot to have people I respected either accuse me of purposely writing a bad review to elevate my own name, or completely missing hidden significances they found in the album ... I asked myself, 'How could you hate an album so many people loved?' "

Music is everywhere these days ... making the '60s New Frontier seem a little, well, passé.

Just as Paul McCartney has said he was inspired by Freak Out!, by Zappa and The Mothers of Invention (1966), to create Sgt. Pepper, Zappa supplied the riposte to the Most Famous Rock Album Ever in We're Only In It For the Money, a considerably more innovative production, and the era's most scabrous social commentary (with its spoken-word opening: "Are you hung up? Outasight.") Zappa remained rock's quintessential party-pooper and musician-composer.

Of course, you can't think of Sgt. Pepper or the '60s without thinking about drugs. I still marvel at the sonically adventurous Byrds' 1966 hit Eight Miles High, and how groovy it was that trippy rock cracked the Top 40, triggering Variety's headline: "Pop Music's Moral Crisis: Dope Tunes Fan DJ's Ire."

Record companies followed suit, and rock-as-"high"-art became not only a cash cow but a sacred cow. Columbia Records summed up the mood with a slogan: The Man Can't Bust Our Music. With self-importance came God.

George Harrison's introduction of the sitar into Norwegian Wood – a brilliant textural touch in one of the most bewitchingly atmospheric songs of the rock era – cleared the path for the era's pseudo-spirituality. Lest we forget, this was the decade when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi topped the list of '60s charlatans, hoodwinking the Beatles. When he met the New York media in 1968, arrangements were made by the agency that handled the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. (When one reporter noted that Jesus didn't have PR men, the Maharishi replied: "That is why he took so many hundreds of years to be known.") Timothy Leary was a close second in the fraud department, "blow your mind" being the ultimate double-entendre. The remnants became a huge industry: New Age.

The advent of rock festivals and pseudo-spirituality went hand in hand; sheer strength in numbers praying to the God of rock (and strength in numbers). Adding to interminable solos by the Grateful Dead, there was the spectre of In a Gadda da vida by Iron Butterfly, and one of the worst pop hits ever: If You're Going to San Francisco (Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair). George Harrison himself made a blissful (staged, 30-minute) walk through Golden Gate Park.

The Event was All, and thus '60s festival acts tended to give overwrought performances, an unsubtle approach that's stuck in today's huge arena rock tours. For further reference, see U2.

Back then, the acts weren't as calculating or media savvy as today's slew (no Auto-tune); few knew the keys to success, what was going to stick in largely unmined virgin territory. As the media terrain was relatively small, the competition was furious yet intimate, the reigning acts listening to each other intently.

There was much teeth-gnashing over integrity, authenticity and "selling out." In a 1969 essay, Rock for Sale, Michael Lydon wrote: "If the companies, as representatives of the corporate structure, can convince the rock world that revolution is won or almost won, that the walls of the playground are crumbling, not only will the constituents of rock veal their fate by that fatal self-deception, but their music, one of the few things they actually do have going for them, will have been successfully corrupted and totally emasculated."

Those thoughts seem quaint today, when music is about product-placement and the name of the game is to get into movie and TV soundtracks and commercials; take the money and run with it.

As Train's frontman Pat Monahan told trade weekly Billboard, "If you don't have a Twitter account, you're not going to do as well as you think." Adds Billboard: "The Twitter and TMZ-driven culture of celebrity clearly favours pop stars, who are far more willing than their rock counterparts to be photographed frolicking on the beach with Kim Kardashian or changing outfits five times in one awards show, if it furthers their brand." The so-called "heritage rock acts," said Ke$ha's producer Lukasz (Dr. Luke) Gottwald, "came out of a different time, when there wasn't really much to do aside from listening to records." Hmmm ...

In the '60s, listening was everything, and the thrill of hearing musical progress on Top 40 radio was exhilaratingly subversive. In today's diffuse hyper-linked media landscape, attention spans dissolve quickly.

That said, music is everywhere these days, from anywhere in an Internet world, making the '60s New Frontier seem a little, well, passé. If rap represented the big dividing line between boomers and their progeny, today's "buzz" for technology takes experimentation to new levels (samples, mashups) as well as more prosaic music-by-the-numbers. In this regard Radiohead is a rock group for the ages, deftly balancing cutting-edge with commercial appeal. American Idiot by Green Day is a considerably less sentimental rock-opera than Tommy. M.I.A is a pungent dazzling sonic provider, her songs imbued with an ecurrant social-conscience. Point is: The music is out there.

Yet echoes of the '60s reverberate. The Beatles ranked ninth in sales among Billboard's Top 200 artists last year. Thirty years after John Lennon's shooting came a lavish box reissue of his solo oeuvre and two greatest hits packages, just in time for holiday shopping. Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Neil Young keep on trucking. The touchstones are hard to shake; a recent Rolling Stone headline, "Ben Harper channels Hendrix, Stones with heavy new group," oozes '60s. The National's most recent album, High Violet, is praised for "opening their poetic guitar reveries with a late-Beatles sense of experimentation."

Even Justin Bieber's hairstyle makes him look like the fifth Beatle, his music '60s bubble gum channelled through hip-hop. Retro, updated, whatever ... there's a bit of the swinging '60s in the quintessential postmodern net-based teen idol.

Welcome to 2011.

rodriguez.music@gmail.com

Bob Dylan's Like a Rolling Stone, which came out in 1965, was a song that stopped people in their tracks.

WORDS & MUSIC

Radiohead's new album was released yesterday, but only via digital download. Bernard Perusse has details at montrealgazette.com/wordsandmusic

Thom Yorke of Radiohead, which balances cutting edge with commercial appeal.

Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day, which pulled off modern rock opera with American Idiot.

M.I.A. provides a healthy dose of social conscience.

The Beatles's Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band was inspired by Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention.

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.

Powered by Newspapers.com